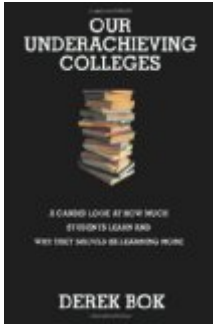


Our Underachieving College Presidents



It would seem absurd to claim that nobody cares about the quality of higher education. After all, anyone paying attention can name a dozen bestselling polemics off the top of their head — *The Closing of the American Mind*, *The University in Ruins*, *Tenured Radicals*, *Higher Superstitions*. But as Derek Bok points out in his quietly subversive new book, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, these commentators have treated universities largely as a punching bag for their political and professional views, rather than out of any genuine concern for the education of the students.

A classic example are the heated debates about what should be in the core curriculum. Should the humanities be required? Should things be focused around the great books? What about classes in writing and public speaking? Professors will happily argue about the proper allocation of required classes for hours, but you'll never once hear them comment about the way in which these classes are taught. And without decent technique, it doesn't matter what the topic of the class is.

Bok shows deep familiarity with a largely-hidden literature about the effectiveness of college teaching. Nearly 80 percent of all college courses are simply lectures by professors, a stunningly ineffective form of teaching. By the end of a lecture, a student remembers less than half of what was taught. Only a week later, that number is down to 20%. At such stunning rates, it's hard to imagine much is left after a month, let alone by the time the student gets out of college.

And yet nobody seems to care one whit. Bok is hardly to be excepted from this criticism. After the Larry Summers scandal, he was appointed acting president of Harvard University (and before that he was president from 1971 to 1991). Bok expects to only have the job for a year and no doubt his hands are tied in many ways — but rumor about campus is that he wants to make his year count. Yet Bok's biggest changes have been a recommendation for more hands-on activities and the elimination of early admissions. Not bad moves, by any means, but hardly anything like the deep rethinking Bok's book suggests is necessary.

But if Bok — a thoughtful and intelligent figure who has written eloquently about these problems — can't use his position — the most prominent spot in the entire field, with the deadline already on his head freeing him from any accountability — can't do anything about these problems, what hope do we possibly have? Opportunities like this come around once a century and it appears that Bok is going to blow it.

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